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Wireless industry nibbles at Bluetooth

Computer Dealer News; Willowdale; Dec 21, 1998; [Jennifer M O'Brien](#);

Volume: 14
Issue: 48
Start Page: 1, 45
ISSN: 11842369
Subject Terms: [Interest groups](#)
[Computer industry](#)
[Telecommunications industry](#)
[Standardization](#)
[Wireless communications](#)

Geographic Names: United States
US

Companies: [Bluetooth Special Interest Group](#)

Abstract:

More than 240 computer and telecom players have banded together and joined the **Bluetooth** Special Interest Group in an effort to establish a royalty-free standard that will allow electronic devices to communicate with each other. This broad industry support marks the first time the mobile computing and wireless telephony worlds have attempted to converge.

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[Headnote]

Vendor/telco consortium aims for convergence

Danish Viking King Harald Blatand leaves his mark on society even today-centuries after wandering the Scandinavian countryside unifying its people.

Just as Blatand - nicknamed **Bluetooth** for the discoloration of his teeth -- unified the Scandinavian regions in the Middle Ages, today more than 240 computer and telecom players have banded together and joined the **Bluetooth** Special Interest Group (SIG) in an effort to establish a royalty-free standard that will allow electronic devices to communicate with each other.

Analysts are predicting it's the next big technological wave that will revolutionize the way in which people do business, says Ken Dulaney, vicepresident of mobile computing for the Stamford, Conn.-based Gartner Group.

And it is unique.

The modern-day unification of powers and technology is the brainchild of founding fathers [Ericsson](#), IBM, [Intel](#),

ⓂNokia and ⓂToshiba, says Per Bengtsson, ⓂEricsson's vice-president of investor relations, adding that members were inspired by the unifying actions of the king and hence codenamed the wireless communications initiative in his honour.

This broad industry support marks the first time the mobile computing and wireless telephony worlds have attempted to converge. It reads like a veritable "list of who's who in both the communications and computer industries," says Andrew Seybold, senior partner for the Brookdale, Calif.-based Andrew Seybold Group, LLC.

Indeed this colossal technological bridge sounds worthy of portrayal in an inspirational Hollywood flick not unlike Gibson's *Braveheart*. But, apart from its mighty impressive size, just what will the world of **Bluetooth** look like?

Essentially, **Bluetooth** Technology will allow users to connect their mobile computers, digital cellular phones, handheld devices, network access points and other mobile devices via wireless short-range radio links unimpeded by line-of-sight restrictions - a key feature that improves upon the IRDA technology. "One of the reasons that infrared has not been successful is because it was a computer-driven technology that did not gain support of the communications industry in a timely fashion," Seybold says.

Unlike IRDA, **Bluetooth** will operate on globally available unlicensed radio band at 2.45 GHz and will support data speeds of up to 721 Kbps. In a nutshell, a new user scenario unfolds. Users will be alerted to, and can respond to, incoming e-mail via their mobile phone while their mobile PC remains in its carrying case. When the PC receives an e-mail message, an alert will sound on the mobile phone. It is then possible to browse incoming e-mails immediately, reading the contents on the display of the mobile phone.

Other touted benefits include allowing users to access the Internet via a completely wireless connection routed either through a mobile phone, or a wired connection such as PSTN, ISDN or LAN; and allowing users to send an instant postcard by cordlessly connecting a camera to a mobile phone or any wire-bound connection.

With all of this in mind, SIG players are predicting the initial product rollout to be the end of next year and stretching into the year 2000, says Andrew Till, technology strategist for the Milton Keynes, U.K.-based Psion Dacom. He acknowledges that initial products will not be working to their fullest potential. "The very early products will probably be point-to-point and not point-to-multipoint," he says. "They will probably offer the data synchronization but not the full-blown voice capabilities. And the data throughputs may not be as high as the fullblown **Bluetooth** we're aiming for in the first and second generation."

But apart from all the bells and whistles and projected product glitches, one significant hurdle could derail the initiative from even getting off the ground.

"There's a bit of a hiccup, I think, in the process right now that they have to get over and that is that ⓂMicrosoft is not supporting the technology," Dulaney says. "There's something to do with intellectual property. One of the vendors - we suspect it's either ⓂIntel or ⓂEricsson - that has got something that ⓂMicrosoft regards potentially as proprietary and they're fighting over this issue. So, therefore, ⓂMicrosoft is not supporting it. And that is a very big obstacle for the success of **Bluetooth** because you've got to get ⓂMicrosoft support."

Seybold seconds the concern but anticipates this issue to be resolved quickly. "ⓂMicrosoft wants to be on board. They want to embrace **Bluetooth** very much because it's an enabling technology for Windows CE devices, but this intellectual property issue has to be resolved first - and there are people working on that."

He says ⓂMicrosoft isn't the only company grappling with this issue. "In fact, some of the software vendors who signed on in the initial rush are having second thoughts because of this intellectual property requirement."

ⓂMicrosoft officials declined to comment, saying only that the organization is currently reviewing the **Bluetooth** initiative and trying to decide its participation.

Simon Ellis, an ⓂIntel marketing manager for **Bluetooth**, says the show will go on irrespective of the software giant's presence at the SIG table. "Because we're so much in the computer space and in the telecom space . . . I wouldn't say it's a requirement that ⓂMicrosoft be there. But any help is obviously good for the program."

But with heavyweights like Ⓜ3Com, ⓂMotorola, Compaq, Puma Technologies, ⓂDell, ⓂQualcomm, ⓂXircom, ⓂSymbian and ⓂLucent Technologies UK jumping on board, the initiative is likely to be a shoe-in.

Although the **Bluetooth** glory may come to fruition sometime in the next generation, other "teething problems" need to be addressed, Till suggests. Outstanding issues include: licensing and availability; country approval regarding the ISM radio band; technological specifications and the working out of draft 1.0 (0.7 has already been inked); and making the technology Internet Protocol compliant.

Initial cost may be an early hindrance to user acceptance. Everything needed to be **Bluetooth**-capable will be contained in a module that will cost between US\$15 to US\$20. Driven by volume, the cost should drop to about US\$5 by 2001. This translates into a US\$50 premium on products, Till says. And if all goes bust, Seybold says there are backup plans. "There are several alternatives that I'm not at liberty to talk about, but the concept is so solid that if something happened to **Bluetooth**, there are other technologies in the wings that could step in and replace it."

Dulaney hints at Home RF Lite, a home wireless solution, to be one of them. Despite the unresolved issues, some statistics reveal that users are ready for wireless connectivity. For example, a 1998 IDC smart handheld devices survey in the U.S. concluded that "more than 58 per cent of the respondents desired a wireless connection, compared with only 31.6 per cent who preferred a wired solution."

But the burning question is: "How ready are users, culturally, for this type of technology?" asks Michael O'Farrell, vice-president of PCS Innovations. "The consciousness of the user hasn't reached the change level yet."

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